

## Last Letter

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Timothy 4:6-22

We are about to read Paul's last letter. We have 13 Pauline letters in the New Testament; most scholars think this was the last one, written shortly before he died.

Tradition tells us that Paul died somewhere around 65 AD as part of the persecution of Christians under Nero. In July of 64 AD, there was a big fire in Rome and after the fire, as a way to deflect blame from himself, the emperor Nero claimed that Christians set the fire, and he followed that up by throwing Roman Christians in jail, and executing many of them. For Roman Christians, it was a dark and fearful time.

Paul was in Rome during this fearful time. He was there because he had appealed to Caesar in the court case brought against him in Jerusalem where his enemies had accused him of disturbing the peace. You can read about that in Acts 25:11. His appeal had brought him to Rome where he hoped to get a fair hearing. When Paul was first brought to Rome he was put under house arrest, which means you're a prisoner under guard, but in your home, which isn't so bad. You can read about Paul's house arrest at the end of Acts. But after the fire and the false allegations, the empire turned on the Christians, so Paul's house arrest turned into something much different: a cold jail cell with stone walls, dim light, and heavy chains.

In jail Paul writes a letter to his friend and student Timothy who is back in Troas, in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. Now, imagine you are Timothy sitting at your house in Troas sipping a morning coffee, and the mail carrier comes to your door and gives you your mail. You start sifting through it. Most of its junk mail: 'Would you like to extend the warrantee on your chariot? It's easy with low monthly payments'...no thank you...Junk. 'Vote for Flavius in the upcoming Counsel elections, Flavius is the friend of the little man'...also junk. But then at the bottom of the pile is a letter from your good friend Paul. You are excited. You know Paul is in jail in Rome. You know he's facing serious danger, but at least this letter shows he's still alive. With your heart beating you rip it open and start reading. The letter concludes with these words, and as I read it imagine you are Timothy reading these last words and ask yourself how you would you assess the mental and emotional state of your friend. Read 2 Timothy 4:6-22

So, if you're Timothy, based on those words, what's your sense of your friend's emotional state? If I were Timothy, I would be worried about my friend. Paul certainly keeps the faith in this letter. Despite his chains he is confident that the Lord will give him the crown of life. Despite his chains he says "The Lord will rescue me from every attack and bring me into his heavenly kingdom." But as positive as those words sound, it's pretty clear that Paul's not expecting an earthly rescue. He's not expecting a repeat of what happened in Philippi when the earthquake shook the prison and his chains fell off; when Paul talks about rescue and the crown of life, he's thinking of a heavenly crown and a heavenly rescue. Paul expects to die.

Not only that, if you read the rest of what Paul writes, it's pretty clear that as Paul approaches his death he's discouraged, he's down. That shows up on four fronts.

Paul is cold. "Bring me my cloak!" He says to Timothy. 'I think I left it over at Carpus' house in Troas, please come and bring it with you. I need it in this cell.' Winter is coming.

Paul feels betrayed and abandoned. He lists people who walked away from him. "Demas has deserted me! He loves the world; he's not interested in sharing my suffering. Titus and Crescens both left." It's not the first time in the letter where Paul expressed feelings of abandonment. In chapter 1 verse 15 he tells Timothy, "You know that everyone in Asia has deserted me including Phygelus and Hermogenes." All my friends in Asia, in Ephesus and Colossae and Galatia, they're all ditching me. In chapter two he talks about two former colleagues in ministry Hymanaeus and Philetus who have turned away from the truth, who are now opposing him. As Paul sits in his cold cell facing death, it's clear that he feels the weight of abandonment.

Paul is worried about the future of the church. 2 Timothy is different from some of Paul's other letters. Its tone is more dire. Ephesians starts out with this glorious hymn about how the power of God is bringing together all things in heaven and on earth under the rule of Jesus. 2 Timothy is full of warnings about the church coming apart. False teaching that will spread like gangrene, metalworkers who inflict great harm, "Mark this!"

Paul tells Timothy, “There will be terrible times in the last days! People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, without love, unforgiving, slanderous...” Paul is worried.

And maybe most poignant of all, Paul is lonely. I’m sure Timothy sensed his friend’s loneliness. Paul opens his letter by telling Timothy, “I long to see you!” and then Paul closes his letter with two more pleas for Timothy to come and see him. You heard me read those just a minute ago: Verse 9, “Timothy! Do your best to come to me quickly!” And then again in verse 21, “Do your best to get here before winter!” People have left me, I’m alone in this cell. Please Timothy, I need to see you. I need some company. I need my friends.

Don’t get me wrong, Paul continues to proclaim gospel hope throughout this letter, but underneath that proclamation you can hear that he is cold, sad and lonely. He’s wondering if all his good work is coming apart. ‘I am being poured out like a drink offering,’ he says. A drink offering something poured out on a burning sacrifice. Something that is poured out and goes poof; like when you pour a cup of water on a fire, and there’s a hiss and a puff of steam, and then it’s gone. That’s me, says Paul.

So far I’ve tried to paint you a picture of Paul’s mood and situation in this letter, and I hope you can sense what he was feeling. But here’s the interesting thing: Paul’s in his cell and he’s cold and lonely and discouraged, and from his perspective you can see why he feels that way. You can see why he feels like he’s being poured out like a drink offering, you can see why he feels like so much of his work is coming apart. But does Paul see his situation correctly? I actually don’t think he does. I think that Paul’s second letter to Timothy has some dramatic irony. Maybe you remember from your reading or from your English classes that sometimes in a story, the reader knows more than the narrator of the story. The narrator in the book is blind to some things in the story that the reader can see perfectly well. I think Paul is the narrator in 2 Timothy, but the author of the letter is not just Paul, it’s also the Holy Spirit. And by the working of the Holy Spirit, as we read the letter, we can see that things are not as bad as Paul thinks they are

Paul sits in his cell and he feels like a helpless prisoner, but in reality even in that cold cell God is doing amazing things through Paul. Paul’s view of things is shaped by his chains and his cell, but if Paul could stand where we stand now, he would see that by the work of the Holy Spirit, God has taken the drink offering of Paul’s life and used it to accomplish far more than Paul could ever ask or imagine.

“Everyone in Asia has deserted me!” says Paul. I worked in Ephesus and wrote them that letter and now they’ve all turned their back.” Paul, do you have any idea how influential your work in Ephesus will be? Do you have any idea how many people will read your letter to the Ephesians through the years, do you have any idea how God will use this letter to encourage and inspire and direct billions of people through the centuries?!

Never mind Ephesians, how about this letter. When Paul writes to Timothy, he’s all down and discouraged. Paul do you realize that 2000 years from now people will be reading this letter, studying it to learn God’s purposes, studying it to guide their lives. If we were there, we could say to Paul, “Paul, this letter isn’t going up in smoke, on August 18, 2024 a whole church full of people will be reading it in Grand Rapids Michigan.” And Paul would say, “Michigan, what’s Michigan?” And we would say, “Never mind.”

One more observation here. Cold, discouraged Paul says to Timothy, “Bring me my scrolls, and bring Mark, Luke is here with me already.’ We need to stop for a moment and picture this scene. If Timothy follows through on Paul’s request to bring Mark and the scrolls (and I think he does), who will be in the room with Paul studying? It will be Timothy, Mark and Luke. Mark and Luke (the gospel writers!), all four of them gathered around scrolls and parchments. What was on those scrolls? Not his letters; they are already written. When were the gospels written? Mark was the earliest, probably written in the late 60’s, shortly after Paul died. So if Mark and Luke and Paul are sitting in his cell with a bunch of scrolls just a couple of years before the gospel of Mark was first circulated, what do you think was on those scrolls? I think it was the early drafts of the gospels. The scrolls Paul asks for are the early drafts the gospels! This meeting and these scrolls will become instrumental in creating what are now the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Luke. “Paul! Your life isn’t coming apart; the Holy Spirit is using you powerfully. Even in this cold cell, the Holy Spirit is using you to change the world! Even in this cold cell the Holy Spirit is using you and Luke and Mark to feed the souls of humanity, to reveal to the world its savior and Lord, to create words of hope that will be life bread for people for generations to come.”

I wonder when you picture Paul discouraged in his cold cell, but the Holy Spirit doing wonders through him that were infinitely more than he could ask or imagine, does that comfort you? It comforts me. None of us

are in a cell but a lot of us are hemmed in and discouraged. Some of us are discouraged by what's going on in the church, you are tired of the fights and the tension. You feel weighed down. Many of us, maybe all of us, feel hemmed in by the fights in society, the divisions that seem to get wider and meaner. Many of us are hemmed in by things closer to home. There's a situation in our family that threatens our happiness. You've done everything you can to address it but it's still there, and every morning when you wake up it's right there, burning in your mind, hemming you in. Sometimes we're hemmed in by aging. Can aging feel like a prison where the walls close in and leave you struggling with discouragement, leave you wondering if your work means anything anymore? Yes. In all these places we can feel as though our lives are being poured out like a drink offering and it's all just going poof.

Don't you believe it. Just like Paul, there is more going on than you think. Do not let your discouragement, your frustrations become the story of your life, because you are a beloved child of God and the Spirit is at work in you. I can't promise you that your prison will vanish. It didn't vanish for Paul. Paul doesn't get freed from his prison; he ends up being executed. But even in his cold cell the Holy Spirit was taking his actions of love and faithfulness and kindness and encouragement and He was using them far beyond what Paul could possibly see. And so it is for you in your cold cell. The Holy Spirit is taking all your small acts of love and faithfulness and hope and encouragement and he is doing more with them than you can possibly imagine. Discouragement is not your story; life is your story. The resurrection is your story. Jesus is your story. and because of him you will receive the crown of life.

This summer, even on sabbatical I was not immune to the worries of life and the world and the church. Just like you, my mind would go to these problems and how to handle them. Sometimes I felt hemmed in. In the face of that, I found myself turning to Paul's overflowing passages. Do you know about Paul's overflowing passages? Often at the end of a letter or in the middle of a letter where Paul has been wrestling with something difficult or proclaiming something hard, he will break out these moments of praise and doxology where the goodness of God floods his vision and overwhelms him with wonder and hope. If I feel hemmed in, for me, it feels like light flooding the prison cell. I leave you with one of those passages this morning. These are words for whatever hems you in right now.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ©Rev. Peter Jonker